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Tunisia

Expert Q&A – Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed's Digital Army

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Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed has been leading a high-profile crackdown on his perceived critics, with a growing number of opposition politicians, activists, journalists, judges, lawyers, and others jailed since February 2023. Garnering less international attention, but also highly concerning, is a parallel campaign by Saïed's supporters on social media aimed at silencing his opponents.

POMED's Zachary White spoke with Tunisian journalist Amine Snoussi to discuss this cyberharassment of Saïed's critics and how Tunisia's government is participating in the digital crackdown. Saïed's supporters are weaponizing social media to discredit and intimidate opponents, particularly the media, as well as to defend the president's narrative. The government, for its part, is using a repressive new cybercrime law not to tackle this hate speech and disinformation online, but instead to target and jail Saïed's peaceful critics.

At the end of the Q&A, POMED offers policy recommendations for the U.S. government and social media companies to respond to this growing threat to rights and freedoms in Tunisia. The United States should use a wealth of multi-stakeholder initiatives and foreign assistance tools, many launched at its two Summits for Democracy, to tackle online harassment and defend journalists.

POMED: When did these attacks start, and what do they look like?

Amine Snoussi: Saïed's supporters have always had a heavy digital presence, but ever since his coup on July 25, 2021, they have been more public and more aggressive. Now, whenever the president publicly identifies targets, his backers kick into gear creating content to attack them.

Here's how it works: Saïed will use a public setting, such as a televised speech or a recorded meeting with one of his ministers, to point out a group of opponents—parliament, the judiciary, the media, the political opposition, civil society, business leaders—and accuse them of plotting against the state. This is the green light for his

supporters to begin identifying and targeting specific individuals, as well as anyone who appears to support them. These social media attacks—mostly on Facebook, the leading platform in Tunisia, with 70 percent of Tunisians having at least one active account—take a variety of forms.

To give one example, after Saïed fired 57 judges one year ago and publicly accused the judiciary of failing to "purify itself," his supporters began attacking women judges online. Pro-Saïed Facebook accounts shared highly sensitive personal information about them, including medical records showing the results of one judge's court-ordered "virginity check," in an attempt to shame them into silence. In other cases, Saïed's supporters have shared the addresses or other identifying details of perceived critics and encouraged others to join the harassment campaigns, a practice known as doxxing. Disinformation has also been a growing problem, with Saïed's supporters inventing or sharing bogus stories, such as claims that prominent journalists are working for foreign governments.

Finally, we've seen alleged leaks of judicial documents intended to paint Saïed's opponents as criminals and traitors. The president's supporters have circulated lists online of people whom authorities have allegedly identified as plotting against the state. In several cases, the named individuals were arrested in subsequent days.

I myself regularly see tweets calling for my arrest while publicizing my personal information and tagging the Twitter accounts of my family, school, or the Tunisian presidency. There was also a Twitter thread listing all the supposed foreign agents working against Tunisian interests, in which I was described as a French-Israeli agent.

What is the purpose of this harassment?

It is primarily meant to intimidate opponents so they will tone down their criticism. This is especially effective with members of the media. I have seen many Tunisian journalists forced to reconsider their language due to these attacks—they ask themselves whether it is worth criticizing Saïed, or whether they should continue using the word "authoritarian." It also puts pressure on their employers, who fear the online backlash and government repercussions that come with employing someone tarred as a "foreign agent." So any journalist who is openly critical of the president is at risk of being fired or denied a promotion.

A second purpose is to defend the president's narrative by discrediting any criticism. In the past, Saïed's online backers were dedicated to convincing new people to join his cause. But as Saïed's authoritarianism has deepened and he has lost the mass enthusiasm he enjoyed immediately after his coup, his digital army has shifted to justifying his actions. For example, over the past year, writing about the repression of migrants in Tunisia, the government's continued failure to reach an International Monetary Fund deal, or food shortages has been sure to invite aggressive responses from Saïed's supporters. They dismiss the critiques as part of a foreign conspiracy and argue that the president is defending Tunisia's sovereignty.

Who is behind these attacks? Is it coordinated?

It seems clear that there is some level of coordination, as the online campaign supporting Saïed—even before his coup—has always been very disciplined. There is a long history in Tunisia of aggressive Facebook campaigns to support politicians or parties, such as those backing the Ennahda party or former Prime Minister Youssef Chahed. These campaigns would sometimes make strategic mistakes, such as failing to agree on policies or taking positions that would put Ennahda or Chahed in a difficult position. Saïed's online campaign, in contrast, does not make these mistakes. It is so coordinated that it is difficult to imagine it being a grassroots campaign led by

simple supporters. The leaking of judicial documents before authorities have released them is also evidence of collusion with state bodies.

I don't think Saïed himself has anything to do with the online campaign supporting him. He himself lacks any digital presence; he does not have his own official Facebook or Twitter page. But I believe that his senior advisors —his team during the 2019 presidential race—came up with the idea of a digitally driven support campaign that has since transformed into an attack operation.

Look at it this way: Saïed does not do press conferences or interviews, and he doesn't have a political party. His communications team knows that Facebook is the only real outlet they have to reach the broader public, and they depend on popular online personalities to spread his ideas. Some are well known, like political commentator Riadh Jrad, content creator Ben Arfa, and political activist Issam Blanko, all of whom have tens or hundreds of thousands of followers. But the majority of Saïed's most aggressive supporters online are hidden behind anonymous accounts with few followers, and some of them are likely bots.

What does Saïed's digital army get out of this relationship?

The relationship between Saïed's team and his online supporters is mutually beneficial. While the former employs the digital army to galvanize Saïed's base and attack his opponents, the latter use their influence to try to influence the president to make certain decisions. Saïed, remember, does not have an organized political party or a stable ideological base. His supporters gravitate to different elements of his political ideology: some might be attracted to his ideas of "bottom-up democracy building," while others are more interested in targeting Ennahda. So they use their influence online to try to nudge him in a certain direction. Some of the president's powerful online backers, for example, had been urging him for months to arrest Ennahda President Rached Ghannouchi before he finally assented in May.

Perhaps the most illustrative example of this dynamic, though, was Saïed's racist speech in February 2023 that precipitated a crackdown on sub-Saharan migrants and refugees in Tunisia.

Prior to this, Saïed had hardly mentioned migration over his three years as president. The obscure Tunisian Nationalist Party (TNP), on the other hand, had long led an aggressive campaign online and in the streets against migrants, accusing them of committing crimes, stealing jobs, and exacerbating Tunisia's economic crisis. Eventually, this campaign reached some of Saïed's online opinion leaders, like Jrad and Blanko, who adopted the cause as their own and generated momentum online for the president to take action.

On February 21, the presidential Facebook page published Saïed's now-infamous statement about "hordes of irregular immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa" who are responsible for crime and violence. Knowing that a virulent nationalism and opposition to foreign influence is perhaps the only common thread among his supporters, the conspiracy-inclined president described migration as part of a grand "plot" to alter Tunisia's demography—a clear reference to interference from abroad. And that's when his supporters, even those who didn't care about immigration before, began to be interested. So just as the TNP managed to get Saïed to buy into its racist theory, the president coopted the theory to rally his supporters and divert attention from Tunisia's dire economic situation under his rule.

The president's statement was followed by an explosion of fake news about migrants. Pro-Saïed accounts shared images of violence that were presented as occurring in Tunisia but were in fact old videos from elsewhere—including one that they said showed a sub-Saharan migrant in Tunisia stealing a phone but was, in reality, Kanye West confronting a member of the paparazzi.

Pro-Saïed groups generated so much content that it was extremely difficult to fact check all of it. Indeed, this is one of their strategies: to flood social media with so much disinformation that the truth cannot emerge fast enough to counter it. By the time journalists started pointing out all of the manipulation, it was too late. People were convinced that they were not safe anymore because migrants were taking their jobs or going to attack them, and we have seen the tragic consequences.

What has the Tunisian government's reaction been to this cyberbullying and disinformation?

Saïed's government is trying to exert greater control over the digital space, but it is the president's opponents—not his supporters who spread hate and disinformation—who are in the crosshairs.

In September 2022, Saïed issued Decree 54, which is ostensibly a tool to crack down on online disinformation and cyberbullying. But the law, which prescribes draconian prison sentences for offenders, has been used almost exclusively to target Saïed's critics. We have seen journalists, students, lawyers, activists, and politicians prosecuted under this law for online criticism of government officials or policies. Decree 54 has also led many activists and journalists to self-censor out of fear. Pro-Saïed Facebook pages spreading misinformation and hate speech, in contrast, have not faced any consequences.

Nor is the government's digital authoritarianism limited to Decree 54. In the ongoing conspiracy case against prominent opposition figures, for example, police confiscated defendants' phones, read their messages, and used those to carry out more arrests. We are likely to see more of this behavior: The Ministry of Interior's cybercrime unit, which has grown increasingly involved in Saïed's repression, has seen its technical capabilities progress significantly over the past decade thanks to the considerable amounts of foreign aid invested in cybersecurity.

POMED Policy Recommendations:

For the United States government:

Increase support for Tunisian civil society and media to counter disinformation, hate speech, and other forms of digital authoritarianism. In addition, the Biden administration should use a host of tools created in response to the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse that are focused on "combatting technology-facilitated violence targeting women in politics and public life, including gendered disinformation."

Protect Tunisian journalists facing online attacks or legal action for their own online work. The administration should utilize several relevant initiatives announced during its 2021 and 2023 Summits for Democracy, including USAID's Reporters Shield and Defamation Defense Fund for Journalists and the State Department's Journalism Protection Platform.

Urge the Tunisian government to repeal Decree 54. As the current chair of the Freedom Online Coalition, the United States should call for a review of Tunisia's membership if it fails to repeal this law, as it is a clear violation of Tunisia's membership responsibilities.

For Meta and other social media companies:

> **Improve the tracking and removal of hate speech and disinformation related to Tunisia, as well as the deplatforming of offending accounts.** Activists point out that Meta and other social media companies have not committed sufficient resources to respond to the growing hate speech and disinformation in the Tunisian online space and that their Arabic algorithms are ineffectual.

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